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American Companies Need Forecasters to Protect Their Share of the Market

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Contact: Pam Huber

AMERICAN COMPANIES NEED FORECASTERS TO PROTECT THEIR SHARE OF THE MARKET

DAYTON, Ohio -- The carbon paper industry was not blindsided by a company that made better carbon paper. Xerox simply showed the world a new way to make copies.

"There's always a chance that the function a company fulfills in society might be served by some other means," says Joseph Martino, senior research scientist at the University of Dayton Research Institute. "And companies ought to have somebody on staff, a forecasting specialist, who is responsible for watching out for new technologies and innovations. There might well be something there that could benefit your company. Do you get in on it or do your competitors?"

Martino, associate editor of the journal Technology Forecasting and Social Change, is completing the third edition of his textbook Technological Forecasting for Decision Making.

He says the first step in successful forecasting is determining the purpose of a company and the function it fulfills for a customer. "You don't buy a drill because you want a drill," Martino says. "You buy a drill because you want a hole. A forecaster can be keeping an eye out for other ways of making holes."

The forecaster should be given the resources he or she needs inside the company structure, says Martino. "The information a forecasting specialist needs will come from other parts of the company, and it should be part of everyone's job to assist the forecaster."

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OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
300 College Park Dayton, Ohio 45469-1679 (513) 229-3241 FAX: (513) 229-3063

Martino says an "imaginative engineer or scientist" already on the payroll could serve as a technology forecaster after suitable training. He's seen increased interest in the forecasting seminars and graduate courses he teaches through UD's engineering management department, with about half of his students coming from the military and half from industry.

He concedes that forecasting is not an exact science. "Forty years ago you saw a lot of speculation about robots," he says. "But instead of a 'general all-purpose mechanical human' to wash the dishes and floors and do the cooking, we got dishwashers, wall-to-wall carpeting and microwaves. We achieved the same function by alternative means."

When Martino looks toward the future, he speculates about:

- Transportation. Will "smart cars" use global positioning or other satellite technology to automatically navigate the highway? Or will drivers take their cars on a ride on the nearest train like a land ferry?

- Bonding agents. Will glue become obsolete when we learn to manipulate molecules and atoms to create a molecular Velcro? If one form of the molecule is put on one surface and the receptor form of the molecule on the opposite surface, the two surfaces would be inseparable when the molecules link. "But how do we get the molecules to bond to the surfaces?" Martino asks.

- Telephones. Will one transmission line carry all of the signals that now come into homes and businesses? All that would be needed is a machine that can distinguish between incoming voice and fax signals, data transmission and cable TV images. "Companies should take a look and be prepared to take advantage of the situation," says Martino. "The technology is already here, success is just waiting for cracks in the legal protection."

Martino believes that the goals of easier transportation, stronger bonding agents and efficient information transmission will come about, though maybe not by the means he's envisioned.

"If I knew for sure, then I would invent whatever it is and patent it," he says.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For media interviews, call **Joe Martino** at (513) 229-3036.